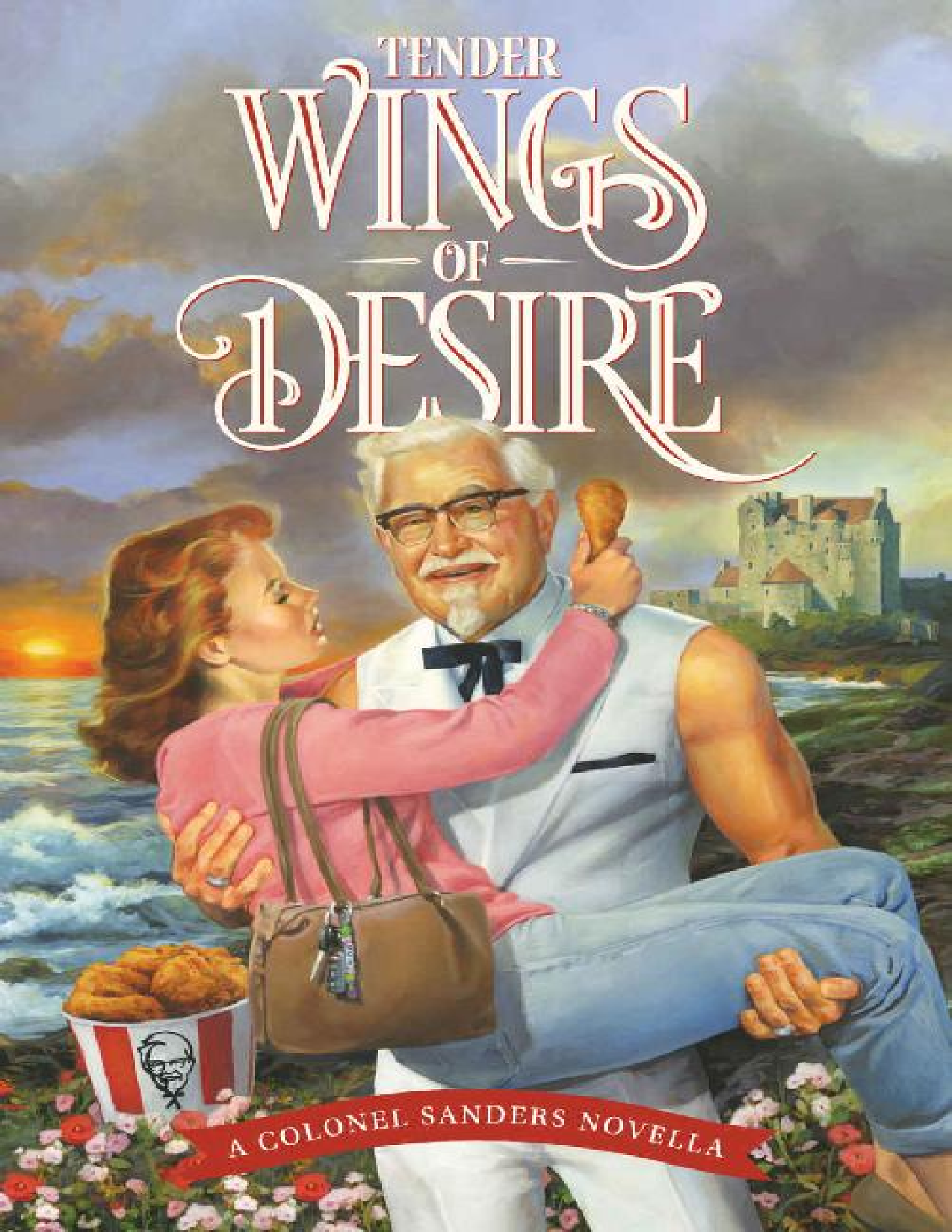
TENDER
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This is a work of fiction. Characters are fictitious
or used in a fictitious manner.

For mothers everywhere,

I dedicate this to you—a brief escape from

motherhood into the arms of your fantasy Colonel.

Whoever he may be.

CHAPTER ONE

Of all the things that Lady Madeline Parker disliked about her life, the one that constantly stuck out in her brain was her hatred of embroidery. There was something inherently pointless about the entire idea, for why would anyone really care about the process of making pretty little designs with a needle and thread? If anything, a needle and thread's use lie in mending, but according to Mama, that was a job for the maids.

She thought about this as she sat in the library, puzzling over an embroidery hoop that was supposed to eventually become a colorful bouquet of flowers but instead just looked like a colorful mess of nothing. Madeline never seemed to be good at the things that apparently mattered.

"This is ridiculous," she complained, fighting the urge to throw her embroidery hoop across the room in dismay.

"Do not be silly," her younger sister Victoria primly replied, sitting straight-backed in her chair and delicately

threading her needle. “It is not useless to create beautiful things.”

Of course, Victoria would say something like this. Victoria always had a precise response. At the age of 16, her sister had already overshadowed what few accomplishments Madeline had. While Madeline possessed zero musical ability, Victoria could play the harp as well as the piano. Madeline could not wrap her head around embroidery, and she could barely dance, but Victoria created beautiful pieces and could dance as though her feet did not even touch the ground.

This wasn’t to say that Madeline believed she was overshadowed; she knew her own strengths. Madeline was very clever, possessed a fine wit, and could ride better than most people in the *ton*. However, there was one very big, almost tragic issue that constantly hung between the two women.

It was Victoria’s lifelong dream to marry, and marry well, while Madeline would be perfectly happy to be a spinster all of her life. Unfortunately, since Madeline was the older sister, it was her job to get married first, and her parents

had lofty plans for her to one day marry a duke. In fact, they were actively courting Reginald Lewis, the Duke of Sainsbury, in the hopes of making a match.

“How romantic,” Victoria had said against all reason, in Madeline’s opinion. The two women had only glimpsed him sitting in the parlor with their father one afternoon, sipping a cup of tea and talking about something that probably would have bored Madeline to tears. He seemed handsome enough, tall with blond hair. “He looks like a fairy-tale prince.”

“He looks like a vanilla biscuit,” Madeline had replied. Victoria looked scandalized.

“You have to be nice!” She insisted. “He could be your only chance!”

It was not as though the two Parker women were not beautiful; in fact their good looks were often the talk of the town, although they tried their best to be modest and gracious about it. They both had the same pale, dewy skin, the same bright green eyes and heart-shaped faces, but Madeline possessed a head of unruly chocolate-colored curls that her maid often struggled to fit into the latest fashions.

Victoria, on the other hand, had inherited their mother's thick, golden hair, which she often liked to wear in a heavy braid down her back when she wasn't in public or visiting. With their beauty and incredible taste in fashion, of course they would both have ample opportunity to marry, and maybe even marry someone of status, but they would not always have the opportunity to marry a duke, and Victoria seemed to think about that fact every day.

So, of course, for the hundredth time, they were discussing that very fact over their embroidery in the library.

"I do not understand why you care so terribly much," Madeline said, just like she had said so many times before. "We are so very young! What is the point of finding a husband and settling down and, God forbid, having a *baby* when there are so many things in this world that we have yet to see? So many things in this world *worth* seeing?"

Victoria looked as though she might faint from the scandal, and she bent over her embroidery in a desperate attempt to focus on that instead, gripping her needle so hard that Madeline wondered if it was going to snap in her

sister’s hand. As usual, Madeline’s own needlework lie forgotten beside her.

“Traveling is for the honeymoon, of course,” Victoria said, her face blushing madly at the thought. “I bet if the duke accepts your hand, you’ll go to such lovely places!”

“First of all, I believe it is up to me to accept *his* hand,” Madeline replied daringly. “And why should he ask? We have barely even exchanged words. I do not know a thing about him.”

“Haven’t you gone for walks in the garden?” Victoria challenged.

This was, unfortunately, quite true, and was one of the reasons why Madeline was beginning to grow a little concerned that what she was dreading would soon come to pass. She had felt it ever since the day she had looked at her life and realized that by societal standards, she was an adult woman of marriageable age. Duke Reginald had begun to call more often, and Madeline found herself whisked away on long walks (always with a chaperone, of course) in which the two of them walked side by side, not saying very much. However, she seemed to be passing some test she could not

understand, because the last time he called on her he kissed her hand, looking up into her eyes. It seemed as though she were stuck on a track, unable to stop, and this near stranger would end up being her husband.

“What’s a walk?” Madeline said stubbornly. “How could he love me from a walk?”

“Love comes later,” Victoria said matter-of-factly. “If the two of you are well suited, then of course you should get married. Would you not *want* to be a duchess?”

Madeline did not know many things, but she knew that she was not fully convinced that she was old enough to make this sort of decision, no matter what her parents told her. She knew that she could not tell her sister that, of course. From the moment she was born, Victoria knew that she wanted an advantageous marriage, preferably to some sort of baron, earl, count, or duke. Were it not for Madeline, Victoria would probably already be married. This frustrated Madeline to no end, for if only her sister had been born first, their lives would be so much happier. Perhaps then Mama and Papa would allow her to travel and seek out some destiny that right now seemed terribly out of reach. Even

now, as their parents plotted and planned to give Madeline away to the highest bidder, she could feel the envy radiate from her sister, and to make matters worse, the feeling was completely mutual. Madeline would have loved a few more years to decide what exactly it was she wanted. Unfortunately, it seemed as though that decision had been made for her the moment she was born.

It was not as though Reginald was a bad sort of man. In fact, he seemed sweet enough and kind enough that there were times when Madeline felt terrible for feeling this way about the entire thing. She had heard stories of so many girls marrying men far too old or far too cruel, men who spent time with women of ill repute or even hit their wives. Reginald did not seem to be that sort of man, and for that she should count herself lucky. He was on the younger side, and was rather handsome in that blond sort of way. There was something missing between the two of them, though, and Madeline was beginning to believe that it was passion, maybe even affection. He seemed well enough, but Madeline had begun to worry that he simply might not be right for her, and worse…that he never would be.

Oh, but she did not dare admit that to any member of her family. Perhaps she could admit such a thing to her brother, Winston, but unfortunately, he was so busy at Oxford learning about business so he could run the estate once he inherited it that she did not dare bother him. In fact, Madeline was pea green with envy at her brother's ability to live such a life. Sure, when he graduated he would have to come right back, take up a wife, and start helping Papa with the estate, but he still had an entire year to go before that had to happen. Now he was off learning, and not only that, during breaks he could simply nip off to the Continent and learn an actual thing or two. Madeline often read his letters over and over again.

"You would love it, Mads," he wrote to her once. "Across the channel things just feel different, they feel special."

Madeline wondered if she would ever see that for herself.

"I do not know about being a duchess," Madeline said at last. "I wish I could go to university like Winston did in order to figure it all out."

"I do not understand the point of it," Victoria said, wrinkling her pretty little nose. "It is all just books and

sums.”

“You like books,” Madeline countered.

“I like *interesting* books,” Victoria replied.

Madeline was about to retort when Mama swept into the room in a swish of silk skirts.

“Hello, my darling ladies!” she said graciously, sweeping over to Victoria and laying a kiss on the crown of her head before turning and doing the very same to Madeline. Lady Dahlia Parker had once been a famous beauty in her own right, and there had been a rather dramatic battle for her hand back when she was in season. Now there was a touch of gray in her golden hair, and she had to tie her corset a little tighter than she once did, but that had not dulled her extraordinary looks.

“I have wonderful news for the both of you,” she said with a winning smile.

“Oh? What is it, Mama?”

Mama reached out and stroked Victoria’s hair, taking obvious pleasure in her daughter’s excitement as she imparted her words.

“It seems as though our Duke Reginald has asked for Madeline’s hand in marriage.”

For a moment, it felt as though the bottom had gone out of Madeline’s stomach. The duke? Asking for her hand in marriage? Without actually asking her? She could feel her mother’s eyes on her, and the thought made her feel a little sick to her stomach, but she forced a smile.

“That is wonderful news,” she said. Objectively, it was wonderful news; many womenin the *ton* were terrified of being an old maid, and now Madeline knew she would never have to be one. Reginald was a nice man, and she would be a duchess, after all. She could feel Victoria’s gaze upon her and wished that the news had somehow been reversed, that Victoria could take this engagement instead of her, but unfortunately life did not work that way. Not here, anyway.

So she smiled.

“That is wonderful!” she said, and perhaps she sounded like she meant it. In any case, it seemed as though her mother was deceived, for she beamed brighter than any star, such was her happiness and pride.

“Excellent, we’re going to announce it at the ball tomorrow. Victoria, you’ll even be allowed to stay up for it, since it will not be long before your own debut!”

Victoria looked stunned at this notion, before it slowly began to register. For a moment she looked excited and yet terribly, terribly envious. Madeline felt the same but about her.

“What do you think, Maddie?” her mother said, looking at her with excited eyes.

“It is wonderful,” she said again, feeling a little silly for repeating herself, but not knowing what else to say.

“Lovely!” Mama kissed Madeline on the top of her head again before sweeping out of the room, leaving both ladies with their embroidery and heavy news. Madeline looked down at the jumble of thread in her lap and felt the beating of her heart quicken.

What was she going to do?

CHAPTER TWO

Contrary to popular belief (rather, the beliefs of her mother and sister), Madeline did not mind getting dressed up. Well, the fact of the matter was that she absolutely loathed the process of getting dressed, but was always quite happy with the finished product. Sure, corsets pinched and the wide hoops of her skirt made her feel as though she were bigger than she actually was, but it did not matter. Sometimes she still enjoyed being pretty.

And pretty she was on the night of the ball; but of course, she had to be, given her future status as a woman engaged to a duke. The entire thing had yet to sit well with her, but she also knew that not much could be done about the matter. Instead she focused on the wide petal-pink ball gown trimmed with green ribbons that brought out the color of her eyes. Her mother even lent her a gorgeous emerald necklace in order to set off everything. Sure, it felt as if it had taken Madeline hours to put on the heavy old thing, but the effect, she had to admit, was rather lovely.

She just wished that she could feel at least some measure of excitement about what was to come.

Victoria, on the other hand, was almost beside herself with excitement. Dressed entirely in white (as unmarried ladies often did before their debuts), her hair put up in a gorgeous bun with curls hanging down, she looked like some sort of angel put on earth to attend this ball, and Madeline was sure she felt that way too. Of course, she wasn't going to be allowed to dance as late as Madeline, and Papa might go apoplectic at the idea of his daughter accepting dances from anyone at this ball at all, but it was Victoria's very first time, so excitement abounded.

Madeline herself did not mind balls; dancing was fun (although she wasn't very good at it), and it was nice to see all the beautiful gowns. She hated to make a habit of it, though, for conversation often ran dry and she ended up so bored. Instead she would seek out anyone who had been traveling lately in the hopes that they would regale her with tales of their travels. She was particularly looking forward to this evening because Lord Hornby had only recently

returned from Bombay, and Madeline wanted to hear his stories about the culture.

Then there was the small matter of Madeline's engagement being announced that very evening, but how could that be very interesting to many people?

They were announced by the butler when they entered the ballroom, the ball itself being thrown by some wealthy family friend that Madeline could never keep straight. Victoria hovered by her side, her eyes widening with excitement as she took in her surroundings: the sumptuous table with little nibbles laid out for the guests to enjoy, the servants sprinkled throughout the crowd holding trays of champagne. Madeline knew that she would be allowed to have a glass of champagne to toast her own engagement; that alone should have been enough to excite her, but nothing seemed to work.

"Oh Maddie, *look*!" Victoria whispered as they lingered at the top of the stairs. She knew better than to point but instead made a gesture with her fan toward the entrance of the room. "Look, there he is!"

It was Duke Reginald, tall and handsome in his tuxedo and tails, his blond hair slicked back as if he were some kind of romantic hero. Madeline knew that her heart should beat faster upon seeing him, and he did in fact cut a very attractive figure as he took note of her and walked over to the two ladies, but all Madeline could feel in her heart was a growing pit of unease. Reginald arrived at her side with a grin.

“There you are, sweetheart,” he said genially. He truly was a nice man, and he offered his arm for Madeline to take hold of. She stared at him for a moment, until Victoria nudged her rather roughly and Madeline realized that it was her duty to be escorted this way.

“Oh, thank you!” Madeline slipped her arm through his, feeling the closeness of his skin. She wished she could feel some thrill—whatever excitement a woman was supposed to feel about her beloved—but instead she felt nothing. Victoria beamed at the two of them as if she were some sort of faerie bestowing blessings.

“You are looking lovely this evening, Lady Madeline,” Reginald said.

“Oh, please call me Madeline, Duke,” Madeline replied awkwardly.

“Then you must call me Reginald.”

“Alright.”

Reginald seemed pleased with this and he turned his eye to Victoria, who seemed startled at the sudden attention.

“You are looking very beautiful this evening too, Lady Victoria. I am sure loads of lucky boys will line up to get a dance with you this evening.”

“Oh!” Victoria’s cheeks reddened so much that she covered them with her own hands in embarrassment. “Oh, thank you, but I haven’t debuted yet. Would it not be a scandal to dance?”

Reginald chuckled good-naturedly. “It is only a scandal if you get caught.”

Madeline hadn’t thought her sister could blush any deeper, but there she was, snapping her fan open and hiding behind the beautiful fabric. Madeline tried to hide her smirk at the entire exchange, and the three of them walked into the ballroom.

A small orchestra played some song in the corner that Madeline wasn't able to identify but that wasn't exactly the kind of song one would actually dance to. The music floated through the air as guests greeted each other, and Madeline's mother came swooping in seemingly out of nowhere, dressed in a spectacular sapphire-blue dress with jewels to match. Having once been the beauty of the *ton*, she was increasingly unwilling to release that title no matter how old she was. Madeline did admire that about her, but not as much as Victoria did.

"Oh, darling Duke, I see you've found your betrothed!"

If the duke were of lesser stature, he might have blushed. Instead he simply smiled and kissed Mama's hand in greeting.

"Yes, I have, Lady Dahlia, and I am very happy to do so."

"Oh please, you'll be calling me Mama soon enough!" she cried with a swat of her fan. "I suppose you better get used to it."

"Call such a young woman such an old-sounding name?" Reginald said with obvious charm. "I could never."

Mama laughed as her cheeks flushed, and for a moment Madeline knew exactly what Victoria would look like when she got older. It wasn't such a bad look.

"You are too much. Our Madeline is going to have her hands full with you."

The sudden use of her name snapped Madeline back to earth, surprising her in a way that almost embarrassed her. Suddenly being shoved into the spotlight overwhelmed her a bit. Although she desperately wanted to simply be ignored during this outing, she knew that would not happen anytime soon, thanks to the news that would be announced right before the dancing.

A gong rang to signify that dinner was ready in the next room, and Reginald gave her arm a soft pat.

"May I escort you into the dining room?" he asked her gently. She smiled at him and nodded. They walked together, leaving Victoria and her mother to find their own way, and she suddenly felt very strange. It was the first time she had been out in public paired up with him, and although she knew that it was bound to happen one day, the fact that it was happening at that very moment was shocking to her.

How was she going to go through the rest of her life being a duchess if she could barely process the idea of wearing the coronet right now?

“You look beautiful tonight,” Reginald said as he sat beside her. Her mouth went dry and she reached for the glass of red wine before her. She was barely old enough to get away with drinking wine at dinner, and she knew that no matter what she wasn’t allowed to drink to excess, so she wet her lips with the sweet-tasting wine and desperately tried to think of something witty to say. That was her strength, right?

“Thank you,” she replied dumbly. Was that all she had? Reginald smiled. His eyes were so kind, and yet the pit in Madeline’s stomach grew wider and wider. “You look nice too,” she added, cursing herself terribly for sounding like such a fool. He looked down at his plate, but Madeline could see the ghost of a smile on his lips. At least she could make him happy.

The rest of the dinner went without a hitch, with delicious food and lively conversation. Madeline never really knew

how to conduct herself in situations like these, which only made her think about her role as a duchess even more.

Wouldn’t it be her job to host parties? To birth children? Wouldn’t she have to be charming in a perfectly wonderful yet unthreatening way? Did she want all of that?

Her fears grew and grew, until the moment her father tapped his knife against his wine glass and stood.

“I would like to thank our gracious hosts for a wonderful meal, and before we all begin dancing, I just wanted to announce the engagement of our dear daughter, Lady Madeline Parker, and the Duke of Sainsbury, Reginald Lewis…they will be married in the spring!”

A hush fell over the rather large table as everyone turned to look at the couple. Madeline could feel Victoria’s eyes on her, brimming with a sort of joyous envy and happiness. She felt Reginald beside her, beaming proudly. Madeline forced her expression into a smile.

The spring? It was already late February. Spring would arrive before she knew it. Suddenly the reality of it all came crashing down on her head. Reginald reached for her hand on top of the table, giving it a light squeeze that should

have made her heart skip a beat, but instead just made her skin crawl.

She would not admit it then, but that was when her plan began to take shape.

CHAPTER THREE

She did not realize it was a plan until the night before her wedding. She was to be an April bride. Once she really thought about it, she was shocked to discover that she did not care which month it was. Victoria was the type to care about such things.

In fact, it seemed as though Victoria cared far more about Madeline's wedding than Madeline did. She buzzed around happily, helping her plan almost every minute detail. Even when it was clear that Victoria was doing most of the planning—from the style of her lilac bridesmaid's gown to the type of flowers that would decorate their house for the lunch that was to follow the ceremony—Madeline felt as though she were sleepwalking through all of the proceedings, and no one seemed to notice.

The night before the wedding, her family threw a little dinner party, inviting her fiancé and his family. Reginald was the eldest son of the Lewis family, but he boasted a younger brother and sister, twins, in fact, who were roughly Victoria's

age. Their names were Gemma and Gerald, and they seemed like two perfectly sweet people. Victoria had already decided that she was infatuated with Gerald, and that Gemma *must* be her best friend. Madeline decided that no matter who those two ended up being, Victoria would feel the same way.

Gemma, to her credit, seemed only to have eyes for Winston, up from university to attend the wedding. She had a pretty decent eye; Winston was handsome in a strapping way, with brown curls similar to Madeline's and their mother's brown eyes. They twinkled now as he winked at Madeline from across the dinner table. Madeline had been able to maintain the ruse of happiness in front of everyone else, but Winston was always able to figure out when something was wrong with her.

Reginald, on the other hand, seemed completely oblivious as he discussed some business or other with Papa. She was so bored she could almost fall asleep, and Winston's swift kick from under the table told her that, apparently, that was obvious.

“Where is the honeymoon planned?” Winston asked, attempting to steer the conversation into territory more people could participate in. Reginald gently dabbed his lips with a napkin before responding.

“I was considering going to London, perhaps. Maybe take some time in the country.”

Madeline had already been to London;she *lived* in the country. She at least thought her honeymoon could be spent somewhere interesting, but it seemed should would experience more of the same. Victoria considered the entire thing rapturously.

“How lovely,” she breathed. “A cottage in the country.”

It seemed very much like the life Madeline had been living so far, and while her life had been lovely, she could not shake the feeling that a window of opportunity was closing.

“What do you think, Maddie?” Winston asked, snapping her out of her self-pitying reverie. She reached for her wine glass.

“It sounds lovely,” she replied quietly. What else could she say? She was trapped on the rails and there was no

escaping it. She cast her eyes down at her meal so she could not see the beseeching concern in her brother's eyes.

After dinner, Mama ushered the Lewis family out, crowing about how it was poor luck for the groom to lay eyes on the bride the night before the wedding. Reginald gave her a timid goodbye and Madeline returned it, all the while trying to ignore that terrible feeling that still nagged at her stomach.

"Think of it," Mama said happily. "Our eldest daughter, married to a *duke*!"

She turned to Victoria, who was still trying her best not to look envious. "Do not worry, my darling. As the sister of a duchess, your marriage prospects will certainly improve!"

This seemed to snap Victoria out of it. "Oh, Mama, do you truly believe so?"

Mama brushed an errant strand of blonde hair off of Victoria's forehead. "I know so, my angel."

Madeline thought she might throw up.

"I am going to be in the library reading," she said a little too quickly before fleeing the parlor. As she walked down the hall, she could hear her mother's tinkling laughter.

“Wedding jitters!” she crowed. “I know it well!”

But Madeline wasn’t sure if that was the case as she closed the library door behind her. She wasn’t sure what was wrong with her. This was every woman’s dream, wasn’t it? She was going to marry a *duke*, which was insanely advantageous for her family. Reginald was a decent sort, seemed kind, and was handsome, even if he did not give her the butterflies she had always dreamed of. What was she to do even if she did not want him? Scandalize the county? Break her mother’s heart?

“You do not have to go through with it, you know,” a voice said from the doorway. She started for a moment before looking up to see Winston, standing there with his arms folded, looking about as serious as she had ever seen him. She collapsed back into her chair.

“Says you.”

“I am serious, Maddie, you look like you are about to burst, and not with happiness like a bride should.”

“Are brides supposed to be bursting with happiness?” Madeline asked absentmindedly. “In this day and age? Perhaps those who marry for love…”

She hated admitting it, and the look on her brother's face only seemed to highlight just how sad it all really was. He walked to her side and placed a gentle hand on her shoulder, and she placed her hand over it, giving it a gentle squeeze.

"You do not have to marry him," Winston said again. Madeline gave a little laugh.

"Little late for that, do you not think? Plus, not everyone marries for love." She looked up at him with eyes that she hoped weren't too challenging. "Do you honestly think that you will?"

The question seemed to embarrass Winston, and he looked away to gather his thoughts before speaking. "I hope to. I think we all hope to."

"Victoria doesn't," Madeline said, trying not to sound jealous of her younger sister but knowing it was useless. Winston shook his head.

"I do not think Victoria actually knows one way or another what she wants, and she certainly does not understand what it all means," he replied calmly. "She'll figure it out one day, I suppose."

“Or not. She seems the kind of lady who was born to be married.”

Winston chuckled. “No one is *born* for that, not really. Come on, you have a big day tomorrow. I’ll walk you to bed.”

The two of them left the library, heading up the stairs into the ladies’ wing where Madeline’s room was. Once at her door, Winston lingered for a moment as though attempting to put together the correct thing to say.

“I am just saying, if you were to run off and…join the circus or something, I honestly would not blame you.”

Madeline laughed a bit, despite her surprise that he had guessed the very thing she had been dreaming of since the engagement was announced.

“Thanks, dear brother. I’ll be sure to write you if I do.”

Winston kissed her on the cheek in a brotherly manner before heading off to his room on the other side of the house. A little way down the hall, he stopped for a moment and turned back to look at her. There was something in his face, a sadness she could not fully understand, and it made her feel stranger than she had ever felt before.

“Good night, Maddie,” he said.

“Good night, Winston,” she replied.

And with that he disappeared down the hall. Madeline slipped into her room then, where Eliza, her lady’s maid, had already set out her nightclothes. Madeline looked at the lace and linen nightgown and felt something break inside of her. Waiting to help Madeline unlace her nightgown, Eliza stood prim and proper in her black-and-white uniform.

It all clicked for Madeline then, what she had to do. She put on a happy face and turned to Eliza, who was about to begin unlacing her gown.

“I am sorry,” she said, pretending to giggle with a carefree expression. “Would you mind terribly if I were to put myself to bed tonight?”

Eliza looked confused for a moment. “But miss…”

“It is okay, really, I’ll put everything away. You are dismissed, Eliza.”

Her maid did not bother to conceal her confusion as she backed out of the bedroom and closed the door behind her. Madeline quickly unlaced the rather elaborate evening dress and let it pool to the ground. Standing in nothing but her

corset and pantalets, she moved to her closet, grabbing a bag that she usually used for long trips. She grabbed as many plain dresses as she could find and slipped into a light blue muslin dress. Lacing up her riding boots, she slung the bag over her shoulder and sat on her bed, picturing Eliza's trek down to the servants' quarters. If she timed it well enough, maybe no one would notice that she was gone until it was too late.

Twenty minutes later, clad in a black riding cloak with the hood up and casting shadows over her features, she snuck out of her bedroom and walked to the stairs as quickly as possible. The house was incredibly quiet, although distantly she believed that she could hear the murmur of voices. Were her parents talking before bed? Was she overhearing some servant's tryst? She did not know, and it did not matter so long as they remained distracted.

Madeline's heart pounded as she left the house and entered the April night air. Winter had yet to truly relinquish its grip on the land, and the night air held a chill that ran shivers down Madeline's spine. Perhaps this chill was less about the weather and more about how terrified she was of

getting caught, but her footsteps led her to the stables of the manor.

She loved to ride, and even now the idea of doing so thrilled her. She could hear the confused murmur of her father’s horses as her scent reached their nostrils. It definitely wasn’t the correct time of day for a ride and they knew that, but Madeline knew that the confused whinnying would pass soon enough, and the stables were too far from the house for this to raise any alarm. Madeline was sure they made noise at all times of the night.

At the end of the line of stalls stood Madeline’s favorite, a sweet dapple gray named Persephone. Although all of the horses belonged to her father, everyone agreed that Persephone belonged to Madeline at heart. She gently patted Persephone’s neck and the horse whickered.

“Would you like to go for a ride, my sweet girl?” Madeline cooed to her. Persephone whinnied.

Having always preferred to saddle her own horse, Madeline had no trouble getting Persephone ready to ride, and under the cover of darkness, she led her beloved mare out of the stable.

Luckily on this night the moon cast a silvery blue glow on everything. Though it might make her more easily spotted on the road, she would also be able to ride without needing a lantern, which would draw even more attention. After securing her travel bag onto Persephone's saddle, she mounted up and gave one last look at the house.

Most of the lights were out, but a few were still on, and she learned at a young age to which bedrooms they belonged. Victoria and her parents were asleep in their separate rooms, but Winston was still awake, and for a moment she wondered if he was looking out the window right now, watching her. She wondered if he would approve of what she was doing.

The worst part was that although she loved her family, she knew that she would never be allowed back. However, she also knew that she needed to taste this freedom, even if it meant her ruin.

"Goodbye," she whispered to her family, knowing that they probably would not forgive her, but willing to take that chance. With a gentle "yah!" at Persephone, she flicked the reins and rode off and away from the only home she had

ever known, not knowing where she was going but knowing that her destiny was ahead of her.

CHAPTER FOUR

Once the sun began to rise, Madeline was surprised to find that she wasn’t a bit tired. Perhaps the shock of running away from home had killed all desire for sleep; in any case she knew that she had to keep moving no matter what, for if she stopped they would probably find her and then all of this would be over.

She could not help but wonder what would happen if she was caught. Would they still make her marry Reginald? Would they simply put her in the madhouse? That seemed unlikely to her; her parents loved her no matter what, even if she had done something like this. She thought the situation would make her feel ashamed, but instead she felt exhilarated. She was free and riding off into some unknown adventure! Surely this was what she was meant to do.

When Persephone tired, Madeline went into the forest to allow her to rest and drink from a nearby stream. She had a little pocket money she could use to buy a room at an inn for the following night, now that she had gotten some

distance between her and the house. She wasn’t sure where she was going, but she knew that she was headed toward the sea, and for some reason that excited her. Madeline had only seen the sea once, back when she was a little girl. The memory seemed like a dream, but now she knew it was where she wanted to go. She most likely had a day’s ride, maybe two, before she reached it.

Then what would she do? She would have to figure that out, now wouldn’t she?

She took a moment and sat in the quiet of the forest, listening to the sound of the babbling brook where Persephone was drinking. Madeline almost could not bring herself to think about her family, or what they must have been thinking the moment they discovered she was gone. She could picture the look of panic on her mother’s face that morning as she entered Madeline’s empty room, finding her gone. She thought about Eliza, her poor maid. She would be the one to raise the alarm, right?

Madeline knew that they were probably furious, at least most of them. Victoria would never understand, and though Winston had basically guessed her predicament, he would

know better than to speak up in her defense when the wounds were still fresh. How will they get out from under the scandal? The thought of that made her so queasy she had to sit on a rock by the brook to stop her heart from pounding.

Should she go back? It was the first time she had considered such a thing, but immediately her heart answered with a resounding NO. It was far too late to do that anyway, and she was pretty sure that her old life was now officially destroyed, no matter what happened. If she went back, her family would still be furious, her wedding would still be canceled, and for all she knew her parents might want to put her in one of those asylums for hysterical girls, and she could not abide that. Her life had ended the moment she had taken that first step to run away. It was terrifying, but Madeline was going to have to find another life.

That night she slept in an inn a little off the main road in the hopes that no one would recognize her or that those who were looking for her would not find her. She was successful, luckily, but still spent a fretful night barely able

to sleep out of fear that her father would burst into her room and drag her home by her hair.

She was back on the road the moment dawn hit, and she allowed herself to enjoy the feeling of riding once more. She still loved it, despite her fear since running away. With the wind in her hair and the beating of Persephone's hooves, she felt like things might end up being okay. It also helped that she had entered territory where there wasn't a remote chance of anyone knowing her, and her simple dress made her breeding hard to determine. She wanted to look like a simple woman out traveling on her own, and it seemed to be working just fine.

As she rode, she could detect a certain change in the air as she drew closer to the sea. The air had a salty tang that she could taste on her tongue, and she could almost hear the crashing of the waves despite the fact that she was most likely miles away still. She allowed her mind to drift to the plan she should have made long before she decided to run away.

Should she escape to the Continent? At the inn, she had counted what money she had left and knew it wasn't

enough to afford passage to France—or anywhere, for that matter—plus food until she figured out her next steps. Madeline knew that she wanted to travel sometime in the future, but she had to be smart about it. She had to land on her own two feet first.

The answer was simple: she would find a town, any town, and find a place to work there. The idea of actually working, earning the money that would help her live, was tremendously exciting for her. It was a destiny far from being a duchess, but it felt right.

The sun was high over her head when she and Persephone arrived at the sea. Well, more accurately, they arrived at a cliff overlooking the sea, and the cliff had a drop that was dizzyingly high. She stood at the edge of the cliff, or as close to the edge as she dared, and watched the waves crash on the rocks below. It did not take long before it began to scare her a bit, and she took a quick step back to give herself a little more distance.

There was something magical about the sea. As she stood and looked out at all of it, whatever doubts she had had about her life and about her choice felt as if they would melt

away. Would she have ever seen such a sight if she had married Reginald?

Reginald. Of course, now her thoughts turned to Reginald. He had been left at the altar two days ago. She did feel a measure of regret for hurting the poor man. Reginald may not have been the man she was going to marry, but he definitely did not deserve such heartbreak.

Although, was it actually heartbreak? How could Reginald's heart possibly be broken when they barely had occasion to speak? Love could not have blossomed in such a short period of time; that is not how love worked.

Of course, how could Madeline know how love worked? She had never been in love, she was much too practical for that. Victoria had always been the one who dreamt about the concept of love at first sight, basically ever since she first learned that such a thing existed. Madeline had always been the cautious one.

Well, cautious in matters of the heart, anyway. Victoria never would have dreamed of running away as Madeline had. She relied too heavily on the world of servants and fancy dinners. Madeline could have lived in that world,

maybe she could have even found happiness, but she also would have spent a large portion of her life wondering what else was out there. What if other ways of living could have made her happy? Happier, even?

She would just have to find out, but to begin she would have to take that first step.

Madeline backed away from the cliff edge and turned back to Persephone, who was peacefully grazing on the grass nearby. She walked over to the mare and gently patted her on the neck. Persephone whickered softly with affection, and Madeline surveyed the land.

The cliffs seemed to disappear down the road, the sea drawing closer to the land and creating a harbor where a little town was nestled, several miles away, by Madeline’s eye, but close enough that she could probably be there by late afternoon. From where she was standing, the little seaside town looked a bit rundown, but it was as good a place as any for Madeline to start over.

She swiftly mounted Persephone and steered her in the direction of the town, trotting toward what could very well be her destiny.

CHAPTER FIVE

From a distance, the town looked shabby, but the closer Madeline got, the more charming the sleepy hamlet became. It was a crowded place. Every home and store was built as close to the water as possible, giving it a quaint, crooked look, as if it were a drawing in a children's book. This made it more endearing than ramshackle. The buildings were crowded together and seemed to spill out near the docks of the harbor, where several fishing boats bobbed up and down like toys.

The cobblestones were a little uneven, so Madeline dismounted in order to better guide Persephone through the streets. No one gave her a second glance as she walked, for once melting into the background. Here she wasn't the eldest daughter of Lord Parker; she was just a traveling woman looking for an opportunity or two. She walked down the street that separated most of the town from the docks of the harbor and kept an eye out for any opportunity. Her eyes rested on a boat or two, though she knew that wasn't

possible given the fact that she had absolutely no idea what to do on a boat.

When she did find her future, it did not hit her like a lightning bolt or some sort of glorious, inspired wave. Instead she merely looked up and saw it.

It was a tavern, clearly one that catered to the sailors who came into the harbor. It was small, with a rickety wooden sign that had an anchor etched into it along with the tavern's name: The Admiral's Arms. Madeline had never been inside of a tavern, but as she looked up at the place she figured that there was a first time for everything. This direction felt right to her.

After tying Persephone to the post outside, Madeline threw back the hood of her traveling cloak and entered the tavern with a pounding heart.

It was a dim place, lit only by the occasional lantern or two, with wooden tables and a fireplace that was currently bare. The long bar was the center of the space and was empty except for the person standing behind it. She had to be the most beautiful woman Madeline had ever seen, with bright red hair and dark eyes that looked at Madeline warily.

“Is everything alright?” the woman asked with a musical voice, speaking in an accent that Madeline did not recognize. She threw the towel she had been using to clean the bar over her shoulder and fixed Madeline with a stare that was more concerned than guarded. For some reason the gentleness of the woman’s look touched Madeline in a way that surprised her.

How messy she must look, dirty from traveling while the salt air did interesting things to her curls. Suddenly Madeline felt so unsure of herself, like she did not belong. The woman waited patiently for Madeline to gather the nerve to speak.

“I was looking for a job,” Madeline said. This clearly came as a surprise to the woman.

“Really now?” Madeline realized that the accent clearly wasn’t some mystical form of British, but she still hadn’t narrowed it down from that. Perhaps it was Irish or Scottish? She had never heard an Irish voice, but her nanny had been Scottish.

“Yes.” Madeline gave another look around and realized that this was exactly where she wanted to be.

The woman looked around as well, as if following Madeline's look, which gave Madeline a nervous feeling.

"I cannot do the hiring," the woman said. "But I need help at nights, and Carson—he's the owner—is never one to actually do the helping and he's always too lazy to take on anyone new. Why don't you stay and help me tonight, and then we can convince him? If you are here and willing, there's no way he'll say no."

Madeline had not been expecting this response, and it took her a moment to sink in. The woman smiled with kindness.

"Really?" Madeline finally said. "I do not know what to say."

"Sure," the woman replied. "All you have to do is tell me your name. I figure that is a start."

Madeline blushed. "It is Madeline."

The woman nodded. "The name's Caoimhe, and please do not ask me to spell it because it is nothing like it sounds."

"It is not K-E-E-V-A?" Madeline asked, already feeling the grin come to her face. Caoimhe rooted under the bar and pulled out a white linen apron, passing it to Madeline.

“Not even close. Now put that on and act like you work here. Carson will be none the wiser. And welcome to town.”

“I do not even know what it is called,” Madeline confessed. Caoimhe laughed.

“Mistle-Thrush-by-the-Sea,” she replied. “It is a mouthful but has a bit of a romantic flair to it, do you not think?”

Madeline did not know about the romance, but she did know that she could easily grow to love this town.

Madeline turned out to be a quick study in the ways of bartending, mostly because it was an incredibly simple thing to do once someone got their mind wrapped around it properly. Caoimhe’s method of teaching was relatively no-nonsense; she relied heavily on treating the student as though she already knew what was being asked of her, and Madeline would fake her way through it, surprised at how easily she could pick it up.

Of course, it was simple enough: wipe down tables, pull drinks for whoever asked for them. After six o’clock, a cook would come in and put together some dinner fare, “Nothing too special,” Caoimhe said with a wave of her hand and a sniff that implied she could do better.

Once Madeline learned the basics, she then learned a little bit about Caoimhe. She was Irish (which Madeline should have guessed), and had come to England a few years ago for a change of pace.

“I do not think it is as much of a change of pace as I would have liked,” Caoimhe admitted. “But I do like the view.”

The view was indeed spectacular, and the tavern exploited it for all that it was worth by installing giant windows that showed a view of the harbor and the sea beyond. Madeline stopped now and again to take in the view but quickly returned to work, fearful that Carson would see her and find her wanting.

“Do not be afraid of the crowds when they come in,” Caoimhe said once she caught sight of the ships on the horizon. “They are not the scoundrels they all think they are.”

It hadn’t occurred to Madeline to be afraid of the sailors, but now that Caoimhe said something, it was all she could think about for the rest of the afternoon.

There were certain things that occurred to Madeline that, because of her privileged upbringing, she simply did not know. Caoimhe's eyes had widened in surprise and a little concern when Madeline told her a slightly edited version of her story. Of course, she left out the part where she was a lady marrying a duke and instead just told the basics of her journey. Caoimhe seemed scandalized.

"All by yourself?" she asked with wide eyes. "With no protection?"

Madeline almost asked what protection she could possibly need—she had a horse and could ride like the wind. What else was there? But the look on Caoimhe's face suggested that there were certain truths that she might not want to know.

Then the shadows began to grow long on the ground; the ships started to come in and so did the sailors. They were a rambunctious bunch, but Madeline wasn't as scared of them as she thought she would be. Caoimhe admitted that these were merely fishermen who went out to sea during the day and returned home to their wives at night. They certainly smelled like it to Madeline, like salt and fish, but she found

that she did not hate it. They were polite, removed their hats, and asked polite questions about the “new worker.” Caoimhe had a terrific rapport with most of them, pouring their tankards of ale and joking with them. Madeline desperately wanted to have that easy rapport, but she knew that it would take time. Hopefully time was what she had.

Carson arrived at half past six and turned out to be completely different from what Madeline had been expecting. She had pictured him as some grizzled old man, perhaps a former sailor with tattooed forearms and a perpetual grumpy expression on his face. While some of that was true (he did seem perpetually grumpy), he was actually much younger than she had anticipated. She wasn’t sure, but he might have been any age between her Winston and her father, with brown hair already touched with gray. He walked in, greeted some of the regulars, glanced at Madeline, and moved to the till to see how much they had made for that evening before stopping to send a confused look Madeline’s way.

“Caoimhe,” he said slowly. “You look different.”

“Do not try to be funny, Carson,” Caoimhe said, coming out from the back where she had been checking on things with the cook. “It does not become you.”

Carson scowled at her, but even Madeline could see that there wasn’t any malice in it.

“Then would you care to explain?” he asked her. Caoimhe wiped down the bar and pulled a tankard of ale for a customer who had just arrived.

“I need help around here, Carson. I’ve been telling you that for how long? And like some angel from heaven, this woman comes out of nowhere looking for employment. I did not dare say no to such a wretched creature.”

Carson turned to look at her, taking in her relatively well-made dress, simple though it was, and glancing at her hands, which, in spite of working all afternoon, still had the softness of someone who had never worked a day in her life. Madeline gave him her most winning smile, and he sighed.

“You have a place to live?” he asked her. For some reason this question took her off guard.

“Um.”

“That is a no. Listen, dearie. I do not know where you’ve come from or why. I do not know what you are really doing here, or even if there’s an answer for that, but you smell like money even if you do not know it, and I really hope you will not be bringing trouble to my door.”

“I do not plan to,” Madeline said, still a little dazed at how easily she had been figured out. Carson studied her face again and seemed to like what he found, because he nodded and turned to Caoimhe.

“I trust you on this one, but do you mind if she shares the rooms upstairs with you?”

Caoimhe nodded. “I figured you’d ask me to do that, so I did not have much of a choice.”

“Cheeky girl.”

And that was that. Carson went into the back to see how the cook was handling the stew he was making for that evening, and Caoimhe smiled in triumph.

“See? I knew he would not argue once I got you here, it is not his way. Welcome to The Admiral’s Arms, Madeline! I hope you have many happy days here.”

With that Caoimhe walked away to see to a customer, and Madeline was left to process the fact that she had successfully found a job and her immediate concerns had been solved. For the first time since she had left her parents' manor in the dead of night, Madeline felt herself smiling in a way that was completely hopeful.

"Well, well, well, what have we here? Did Caoimhe finally convince Carson to hire a new worker?"

Madeline turned to answer the man, not quite caring for his tone, only to come face to face with the most handsome man she had ever seen.

CHAPTER SIX

He was tall, dressed like a sailor with a striped linen shirt and woolen peacoat crusted with sea salt. His hair was light and fair, framing his head in airy curls, and the eyes that stared back at her were almost the exact color of the sea, perhaps darker, but not by much, and they hid behind glasses with dark frames. Madeline had never seen a sailor wear glasses before; somehow it made him seem all the more handsome. He leaned on the bar, his eyes looking into hers and liking what he saw. This wasn't like when Carson had appraised her; this was different. And for a moment she felt hot and cold at the same time.

"Um," Madeline said. He smiled at her.

"The name's Harland. What's yours?" His accent was one she had never heard before, sounding like a soft version of an American accent.

"Madeline."

"That is a beautiful name, Madeline," he said. "You must be new here."

Her mouth went dry as she tried desperately to figure out why this conversation was still happening. It was strange; it was not as though the other customers hadn't questioned her about her arrival. This felt different though; this made her scramble for the proper words to say, something that would make her sound charming or clever, something that would make him want to speak to her more.

She did not realize that all of her thinking and obsessing had been happening in real time, so she was mostly staring at him as she panicked, watching his face grow more and more amused as she struggled to find words that were charming enough. Finally, she just gave up.

"Yes," she replied. "I am new here."

"Well, you are certainly a breath of fresh air!"

He *was* the most handsome person she had ever seen; even his beard made him look more manly than unkempt.

"I've never seen a sailor who wore glasses before," she said suddenly. He grinned.

"Neither have I. Then again, I don't often look in the mirror," he replied.

She felt her cheeks blush a flame red, and she retreated to the kitchen to stop them from blushing further.

In the kitchen she saw the cook, a scrawny boy who barely looked old enough to shave let alone run a kitchen. He looked up from the pot of stew he was stirring. Upon seeing Madeline, he immediately started blushing.

“Sorry, ma’am,” he said uselessly. Madeline opened her mouth, closed it again, and turned to leave the kitchen.

“Everything alright?” Caoimhe asked as Madeline grabbed a towel and began to focus intently on wiping up a small spill of ale.

“Nothing,” Madeline replied absently, not even realizing that she hadn’t answered the question properly. Her mind was still full of his smile, those eyes. What was wrong with her? She barely knew who he was and there she stood, acting like a silly schoolgirl. She managed a glance at him, only to realize that he had been looking at her as well. She gave a little sigh.

Caoimhe followed her line of sight and chuckled.

“I see you’ve met Harland.”

Harland. Yes. That is what his name had been.

“Yes,” Madeline said, all timid and horrible. She barely sounded like herself at this point. What was wrong with her?

“Harland’s a regular, goes out on the boats with the other sailors, but I think he’s the only one who’s really doing it for fun.”

This caught Madeline’s attention.

“What do you mean?”

Caoimhe gave a little shrug. “There’s always been something about him that implied that he was having more fun than just making ends meet. Since he’s here, I thought it was just his personality. That is a gift, isn’t it? To be able to treat everything like a holiday no matter what you are doing. I wish I had that.”

Madeline nodded, hoping that he was no longer looking at her. She snuck a little glance; he definitely still was. She looked away again. Caoimhe found all of this immensely entertaining.

“Isn’t he a dish?”

“I hadn’t noticed,” Madeline replied, not even bothering to pretend she wasn’t lying. That only made Caoimhe laugh again and turn in his direction.

“Hey, Harland!” she called over to him. Madeline was utterly mortified.

“Don’t!” she hissed at the woman she thought was going to be her bosom friend.

Harland looked over, his eyes still alluring, his smile still twinkling, and Madeline tried to keep her composure and not strangle Caoimhe where she stood. She decided that it would not be a good idea to strangle the woman who had given her a job. Madeline may not have been wise in the ways of the world, but she did know that.

“Come over here!” Caoimhe said to Harland, causing Madeline’s heart to sink to the bottom of her ribcage in mortification. Perhaps, if she were lucky, she could just melt into the floor and stop existing.

Even worse, Harland stood up and walked down the bar to sit in front of them. Although Caoimhe had called him over, he only seemed to have eyes for Madeline. This made her nervous, and to combat it she smoothed her hair down, as if that movement would chase away the fluttering she felt in her stomach.

“What would you like from me, Caoimhe?” he asked with his eyes sparkling.

“I am just asking you to be nice to our new worker,” she said with a wink. “She’s come a long way, dare I say. This may be her first job.”

Madeline wondered if it were possible to sink into the floor and disappear. Harland leaned on the bar and looked at her with interest.

“Is it? How old are you, lass?”

His accent definitely sounded too cultured for an American farmer, and being a sailor meant that he wasn’t a member of the gentry. Did they have gentry in America? Did it matter as much as it did here? Madeline was finally beginning to regain a little of the composure she had lost since she first laid eyes on the man. Finally, she felt some measure of who she was returning, and it gave her enough strength to look into his eyes.

“Old enough,” she replied daringly. He laughed.

“A grown woman who has never worked a day in her life? You must have had quite the upbringing.”

“Clearly, I did not if I ran away from it,” Madeline replied a little too easily. Immediately she regretted it; she did not want to give away her entire backstory to this near stranger, no matter how handsome he was. His smile grew slowly again, and her heart began to beat faster.

Was she getting sick? It was the only explanation that made sense.

“Good point.”

Caoimhe decided to take pity on poor Madeline and sent her to collect some empty tankards that had been left at various tables. Madeline gave Caoimhe a look of pathetic thanks and went off to do her job, but as she left she heard Harland’s slow chuckle.

“You better behave,” Caoimhe admonished him.

“On the contrary,” Madeline heard Harland reply. “I think behaving is the last thing I want to do with her.”

In any other context, Madeline would be disgusted. Who did he think he was, saying such things about her within earshot? However, as she walked away she could not help but feel a slow burn deep in her belly, and she wondered what it meant.

That night, when the tavern had closed and the two women worked together to clean the bar, Madeline tried desperately to focus more on mopping the floor than on the look in Harland's eyes when he watched her from across the room. Caoimhe looked over at her and gave a little chuckle.

"What's gotten into you?" she asked. "I do not know you very well, of course, but I am fairly certain that you are not acting like yourself."

Madeline shook her head, pausing her mopping. "I do not know, I think that I am falling ill or something of the sort. Earlier I felt all hot and cold, perhaps all this traveling has caught up to me."

Caoimhe did not look convinced, but she did look amused, and she leaned on the bar and gave a little grin.

"Oh? Tell me more about this mysterious illness that has suddenly befallen you."

Madeline gave a deep sigh that sounded far more dramatic than she felt. "My heart… and my head. And when I looked at…" She cut herself off, thinking about Harland and his stupid, terrible, handsome face. Caoimhe looked fit to burst with laughter.

“Looks like you are in love!”

Given everything she believed about herself, this shocked Madeline to the core, and she shook her head wildly, her chocolate-brown curls bouncing over her shoulders.

“It is not like that at all!” she insisted. “How could I love him? I do not even know him.”

“Do you think he’s handsome?”

“A blind person would think he’s handsome.”

More laughter.

“Does your heart go aflutter when you look at him?”

Madeline snorted. “Do not be ridiculous, I’ve only seen him for one night.”

“You know,” Caoimhe said. “He seemed rather taken with you as well.”

Madeline’s heart did a little dance of fear, excitement, and some other emotion that she could not name. She could feel her cheeks reddening, and it made her feel utterly foolish to care so much about a person whose last name she did not even know.

“Well,” she replied. “That’s…something.”

Truly, she did not know what to say, and under Caoimhe’s knowing grin she felt as though she might suffocate.

The two of them exited the front of the tavern with the intention of walking around the side, mounting the stairs, and heading to bed. As they did so, Caoimhe’s face grew a little sheepish.

“It is nothing fancy, but you can have a room all to yourself, if you are inclined. I am the only one who lives up here. Another lady did once, but she did not last long. She ran off with a sailor a year or two back, and it is only now that we’ve finally gotten around to replacing her.”

Madeline did not understand why, but there was a tone to Caoimhe’s voice that implied that she was ashamed of where she lived, and as she opened the door to the small home above the tavern, Madeline could not see why. There was a homey little sitting room and a bedroom or two just off of it. It was clean and respectable, and Madeline fell in love with it immediately.

“It is perfect,” she breathed. Caoimhe looked away so as not to show her facial expression, which was a mixture of relief and embarrassment over having been worried at all.

“Your room is this way,” she said, heading down to the end of the hall. Madeline followed, excited to be sleeping in a bed that she could call hers, and trying to forget the fact that no matter how much she had tried to shed her image of coming from wealth, it seemed as though it followed her anyway.

Her new bedroom was small—far from the large, sumptuous room that she had fled just days before. It was a little dusty, having not been occupied in a while, but the bed looked clean, with a straw-stuffed mattress covered by a little homemade quilt. Madeline walked over and touched it, feeling the softness of the thing and loving it intensely, even though it was the first quilt she had ever seen.

Caoimhe looked sheepish. “That is one of mine,” she explained. “I had an extra one so I put it here for the next person…who I suppose is you.”

The moment of tenderness passed rather quickly from Caoimhe’s face, and she brushed her hair out of her eyes. Suddenly she looked very tired, and Madeline did not blame her. An ache had begun to seep into her bones. As Madeline

set her travel bag down on the bed, Caoimhe became all business.

“I usually make breakfast in the mornings. Carson would never eat otherwise, and that cook does not know his way around much.”

“I never learned his name,” Madeline said as it began to dawn on her.

“The boy? Liam. Carson found him wandering around one day, figured he could make himself useful somewhere, but I suppose we haven’t found out where yet. Ah, he’s a good boy, if he could ever get the courage to speak. But I am talking too much, you must be exhausted.”

Madeline was about to tell her that it was fine, she wasn’t too tired, but whatever she might have said was soon swallowed up by a yawn. Caoimhe smiled and shook her head.

“You did well tonight, and I think you’ll be well suited for this, but I do want to give you a little measure of warning.”

“Oh?”

Caoimhe’s smile turned a little sad then. “Men like Harland are handsome, and they say such lovely things to a

pretty lady, especially a new pretty woman as innocent as you.”

Madeline wanted to protest, to say she wasn’t innocent at all, not in the least, but she bit back her words because, in all honesty, she was pretty innocent, no matter how much she did not want to be.

There was something in Caoimhe’s expression that gave Madeline pause, however. She narrowed her eyes, studying Caoimhe’s face and its look of discomfort. A question began to form in Madeline’s head, one she wasn’t sure she wanted to ask but also did not think she could *not* ask of this woman who clearly knew more about the world.

“Caoimhe…” Madeline chewed on the words she wanted to say, unsure of whether or not she would offend the other woman by asking at all. Caoimhe’s dark eyes looked fierce for a moment, as though she knew what was coming, but she allowed it to come anyway.

“It wasn’t Harland, if that is what you are going to ask,” she said, answering the question for Madeline before she could even form it. “But I’ve known men like him. All women like me know men like him.”

“What’s a woman like you?” Madeline asked without thinking. Caoimhe looked very sad then.

“Not a grand woman, like you probably were going to end up being,” she replied. “One day I hope you’ll explain what happened to have brought you to a place like this.”

Madeline wanted to protest again, but Caoimhe had already turned on her heel and disappeared out of her bedroom. She sat on the bed, thinking about who she was and who she could be, desperately hoping that she would actually become the person she wanted to become and fearful that the person she once was would always be hanging over her head.

It stayed on her mind as she crawled into bed. It was not nearly as comfortable as the feather-stuffed mattress she had grown up using, but it was hers, and for some reason that made her treasure it all the more.

All she had to do, she decided, was not think about that Harland…no matter how much she wanted to.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Harland was not at the tavern the next day, and Madeline decided that she most definitely did not care if he ever showed up at The Admiral's Arms again. At least that is what she told herself, even as she quickly glanced up whenever someone walked in. The falling feeling in her stomach when she realized that it wasn't him had absolutely nothing to do with the fact that she wanted to see him again—in fact, she barely remembered that his name was Harland. She most definitely did not remember that his hair was such a light blond that it almost looked white, and that his eyes were exactly two shades darker than the sea. She did not think about any of that. Definitely not about how he had been the tallest man she had ever met, and how it made her wonder how he acted as a sailor on a ship. Did it get too crowded below deck? She did not think about how he was the only sailor she had ever seen who wore glasses. She did not care about any of that. Perhaps he was somewhere far away from her now, and perhaps that momentary flirtation did not have anything to do with her.

Caoimhe wasn’t fooled one bit by this act, but Madeline did not care if she was fooled or not, mostly because she insisted that it wasn’t an act. She wasn’t staring dreamily at the docks in the hopes of catching a glimpse of him.

“I am just admiring the view,” she said defensively.

“Oh yes,” Caoimhe said with a wink. “Because that view changes so very often.”

“You are unkind!” Madeline protested.

“I am not!” Caoimhe insisted. “I am being…sisterly. Haven’t you ever had a sister before?”

That part of the conversation gave her pause. Did she want her new life to include a sister? Would she have to invent some new story for herself in order to fit into this new world? How could she possibly explain Victoria to a person such as Caoimhe? Victoria, a girl who only wanted to marry, and marry well, and be a beautiful lady of a house for the rest of her days? More importantly, how could Madeline explain herself—a woman who’d had that life handed to her on a silver platter—only to throw it all away to work in a tavern by the sea?

In her first week, Madeline had been nervous that one day her parents were going to walk into The Admiral's Arms. Any ship that looked even slightly as if it might be carrying the gentry made her run and hide in the back, just in case one of them came in to have a drink before riding off to whatever manor they might be living in. Madeline knew that her fear was ridiculous; she was a solid two days' ride from anywhere she would be known, and Mistle-Thrush-by-the-Sea was one small town in a sea of small towns. Finding her now would be like finding a needle in a haystack.

However, a small part of her, a part that she did not want to admit existed, felt a little sad at the notion that her family had already stopped looking for her. Why would this bother her? It made her feel so incredibly silly to care about such a thing, especially knowing that she had been the one to leave.

Did that matter? She was the impulsive teenager; she was the runaway bride. Her decision to leave had nothing to do with her love for them, but would her leaving change their love for her? Wasn't a family's love supposed to be eternal?

After a week, she wrote a letter.

Dear Mother and Father,

I want you to know that I am safe where I am, although I cannot tell you where I am. I wish you well and hope that my sudden leaving did not cause you any undue pain, although I am not so arrogant as to believe that my actions did not cause some distress to the family, and for that I am truly sorry. It was never my intention to hurt anyone, and I hope that I have not hurt anyone now, but I accept that I might have.

There is no way I could explain why I have done what I have done. There's no excuse for what I have done, and for that I apologize. I just want you to know that I am safe, have the potential to be happy, and will never forget the family I love.

Please tell Victoria that I hope that she will become happy in her life, however that happens, and tell Winston that I trust that he understands.

All my love,

Madeline

She thought about sending it—she almost did, but instead she tucked it away in the bottom of her traveling bag, now emptied of clothing, and hid it under her small, modest bed.

“He does this sometimes, more often than you would think,” Caoimhe said as Madeline looked longingly out the window at the beginning of her second week of work. Madeline did not know what she was talking about and told her as much. Caoimhe rolled her eyes for effect and swatted at her with a towel.

“If that is your face when you are lying, you better not try to play cards with the sailors when they’re on leave.”

Perhaps he was out to sea; as a sailor, that was his job. Perhaps he only came by once every six months, and Madeline had met him the night before he was to ship out forever. She did not know, she probably did not care, and she most definitely wasn’t thinking about him.

Instead, she focused on getting to know the people she was working with, setting her sights first on Carson. He did not seem to mind, as he had taken to her with an almost

brotherly affection. Madeline enjoyed it because there were parts of him that reminded her of Winston, which was bittersweet.

“I was never something so fancy as a lord,” Carson explained. “But my father did better than most in his family. As a banker, he made a decent wage. We did not grow up so bad.”

“How did you end up here?” Madeline asked, and she was genuinely curious. This did not seem like the fate of a banker’s son, but then again being a barmaid did not seem like the fate of a lord’s daughter. Carson rubbed the back of his neck.

“When my Pa died, he did not leave us much—had most of his assets wrapped up. I ended up joining the British Navy, which worked for a while, paid a decent wage, and when I got out I bought this little place. Decided it was as good a place as any to have a business, get married, have children.”

“Are you married?” Madeline had no idea if this was a rude question to ask or not.

“I was married,” he replied. “She died. Thank providence that Caoimhe came around when she did, or else I would have come undone.”

At that moment, Caoimhe brought several freshly washed tankards to the bar. Carson fell completely silent, and Madeline quickly looked away from her, lest Caoimhe become aware that they were discussing her. Of course, being a woman of some intelligence, Caoimhe wasn’t fooled one bit. She looked at Madeline and then at Carson, her eyes narrowing slightly before she moved off to help one customer or another.

“It is good that you had her when you did,” Madeline said quietly in the hopes that Caoimhe could not hear. Carson just nodded before averting his eyes and going back to work.

Later on, Madeline wondered how long Carson had been in love with Caoimhe, and if he even knew that was the case.

By the end of the week, Madeline had most definitely forgotten about Harland, which was why it was such a

surprise when she walked out of The Admiral's Arms one night and came face to face with him.

He was leaning against the very hitching post she had tied Persephone to the first day she arrived at Mistle-Thrush-by-the-Sea. His arms folded over his chest, he looked at her as if she were the only thing he wanted to see at this particular point in time. Once again, she felt that dizzy, sick feeling of being both hot and cold at the same time, and as she walked to him she felt as if her knees were screwed too loose, that she might trip and fall at any moment. If that were to happen, she both desperately wanted him to catch her and also could not stand the idea of him touching her.

What was *wrong* with her? How could something like this happen? Madeline was cautious. Madeline did not know what love was, so how could she know what it meant now?

"Madeline," he said, his voice like a melody. She would listen to him say it for hours if he would be willing to. "I've been looking for you everywhere."

"No, you haven't!" she burst out. "You haven't been in in two weeks!"

He raised an amused eyebrow. “So, you’ve been counting.”

Madeline wished that she could melt into the wood of the docks below her feet, such was her level of mortification. However, he merely smiled at her reassuringly and walked over to her.

“I’d like to ask if you’d do me the pleasure of going for a walk with me.”

It was such a late hour that Madeline wasn’t even sure what time it was. She narrowed her eyes.

“I am not one of those kinds of ladies,” she said, although she wasn’t too convinced of that fact. Harland chuckled.

“It is not that kind of walk.”

“How am I to know that? I barely know you, I’ve only met you once.”

“And I’ve only met you once, and yet I haven’t been able to stop thinking of you since I’ve been at sea.”

Madeline’s mouth went dry. She did not know what to say.

“That is where I was, by the way,” he added. “At sea.”

“Um,” Madeline replied eloquently. She felt like kicking herself after every syllable she spoke to the man.

“I promise, I’ll be a complete gentleman.”

Something in her gave and she nodded, causing his face to light up in happiness. He offered her the crook of his arm, and she took it, her heart almost exploding with delight and anticipation as her skin touched his. What was wrong with her? Cautious and careful Madeline? Her heart could not stop pounding; she felt dizzy. She felt sick. If Caoimhe was right and this was love,she thought that it was *awful* .

He led her away from the docks, away from the shouts of drunken sailors and the cooing of certain women of the night. They walked the winding streets of Mistle-Thrush-by-the-Sea, showing Madeline places that she had not yet found the time to see. Work was busy for her, especially because she was so unaccustomed to it, and she had yet to properly explore the town that was her own.

“There’s Kaity’s,” Harland said, pointing to a darkened shop that looked like it sold various sweets. “The greatest taffy you’ve ever eaten.”

“I’ve never eaten taffy,” Madeline admitted. Her mother could never abide sweets once Madeline and Victoria reached a certain age. Once the thin and pale waifish look

had become fashionable, her mother had striven for her girls to match it. Both ladies were lucky in that they were naturally thin, but she still longed for the taste of a peppermint stick every once in a while.

“It is a seaside tradition, I suppose,” Harland said. “I did not eat it much growing up as a boy, either. I lived too far away.”

Madeline knew she could have asked him where he grew up. She tried again to place his strange accent. Perhaps he had been gifted with some schooling and then ran off to be a sailor when he grew old enough to realize that there was more to life than what he was living. Madeline did not want to know anymore, because Madeline did not want to be asked what she was doing here, or who she had been. At this point, Madeline was sick of who she had been, and it hung over her head like a ghost.

If he was surprised at her lack of interest in his life, he did not show it, and instead they walked for a while in silence, enjoying each other’s company. Madeline could not help but feel surprised, about what she did not exactly know, but once they reached the docks again she turned to him, her

heart bursting with the desire to figure out what was burning in her stomach.

“What is this?” she asked him, the words exploding out of her as though she could not hold them in for one moment. “Why is it that whenever I am around you I feel so…so…”

“Alive?” Harland asked.

“Perhaps,” she replied. “Something like that, how did you know?”

“Because I feel it too.”

She stopped walking then and they stood for a long time simply looking at each other. Madeline’s heart was pounding so heavily in her chest that she did not think she would be able to breathe; perhaps she would die like this. It would be terribly romantic, would it not? To be killed by such a longing.

They were in that moment—something that Madeline had never experienced but instinctively understood. That terrible and wonderful moment where either of them would take that step, break through the invisible barrier that people constructed around themselves, and stop it all with a kiss. She could do it, she wanted to do it. She wanted *him* to do

it, but at the point of no return, she found herself taking a step back, distancing herself from him.

This wasn't her; she wasn't this person. She did not fall in love at first sight, she wasn't the kind of person who eloped or ran off or died for love. That wasn't Madeline. All of this—the connection, the handsome man taking her for a walk, the moment of the kiss—that wasn't who she was and it never would be.

"I am sorry," she said. "I…I can't."

Harland's face crumpled into confusion. "You cannot say that. I've never met a woman like you. We're standing here and we have everything at our fingertips and you are going to walk away?"

Her heart was pounding, reacting to the notion that he was attempting to fight for her. He reached out a hand and gently touched her cheek. She leaned into it as though she never wanted him to stop touching her.

"I am sorry," she said, taking another step back.

"Do not be."

There was such a gentleness in his voice that she looked up at him in alarm. He seemed sad, a little frustrated, a little

sick himself, and the way he looked in the moonlight was so striking that Madeline ended up closing that distance and pulling him in for a kiss.

It was electric. It was everything, and whatever sickness Madeline believed she had from her infatuation with him melted away at the touch of his lips. Her entire body felt as though it were on fire, her heart beating wildly in her chest. He felt so warm, and his arms circled around her waist to pull her closer.

This was the closest she had ever been to a man, and she would not want it any other way. She felt as if she were a woman on fire, feverish in the best way possible, and something seemed to take her over when he deepened the kiss.

She had no idea that it could be like this—all of her thoughts and furtive fantasies about what it might be like had never prepared her for this. Of course, she had tried to imagine it, tried to picture what it would be like kissing a boy, but she had never been able to imagine it feeling quite like this. When she tried to picture kissing Reginald, it had been like kissing the back of her hand. She never imagined

that it would feel like fire and ice and ecstasy all rolled together in one.

She was breathless when they parted, and as she looked up at him, she saw an entirely new and strange aspect of her future unfold. Unfettered by the life that was expected of her, she was technically unfettered from the expectations of her place in society. No longer did she have to maintain her modesty; on the contrary, she was free to be with whomever she desired, regardless of whether they were going to end up being her husband.

Madeline had to admit the idea of it all scared her, for she had grown up with the understanding that lovemaking was entirely in the hands of her future husband, and that it was her duty to submit to him. One night when she was 15, she had playfully discovered a few secret novels that her maid had hidden. They spoke of fire and passion, of wanting, and although the thought of it thrilled Madeline, she was old enough to believe that such a thing could never happen to her. But she had taken comfort in the idea that it existed. Now, as she stood panting and looking upon this man, she

realized that if she were so inclined, she could make him her love.

“Would you like to come back to my room with me?” she asked boldly.

In another world, perhaps he would have cracked a joke; he would have said something or backed away from the feeling, but she watched the want and need in his eyes. She watched the connection that neither of them could really deny even if they wanted to.

“Yes,” he told her, and she could hear in his voice that he, beyond a shadow of a doubt, wanted her as much as she wanted him. She reached for his hand and she took it, feeling the buzz of the connection between them, and she quietly brought him up the stairs to the small apartment above the tavern.

Caoimhe was most likely asleep, so they snuck as quietly as possible down the hall into her room.

This was something Madeline had never considered. Although she knew well enough what went on between a man and a woman, for a moment she thought that she might swoon in his arms.

They kissed again and again, Madeline’s heart pounding desperately with the excitement of the feeling. As she lie in his arms, she could not help but feel as though she finally belonged somewhere, to *someone*, and she knew in that moment exactly what it meant to feel love.

“Where have you come from?” Harland murmured into her hair once they were finished with their kisses. She wrapped her arms around him before finally saying it.

“A manor house,” she replied. He raised his head to study her face, the expression on his own too hard to see in the dark.

“Were you a maid?” he asked her, and she shook her head.

“I was a lady.” Admitting such a thing felt like a great burden had been removed from her chest. So many people so far had already basically guessed who she was, most likely from her posture and the fact that she had started working at The Admiral’s Arms with the softest hands anyone had ever seen. “I suppose it does not come as much of a surprise.”

“Perhaps not…but you are *here*. What happened? Were you orphaned? I mean that’s…”

Madeline turned to look at the ceiling. “No, I just ran away.”

“Why?”

She explained everything to him then, knowing that out of everyone she had met since the day she walked out of her parents’ house, he was the one who deserved to know the most. If they were going to be lovers, she wanted him to know exactly who he was spending his time kissing. She told him about Reginald, about the engagement, about how she had run like a thief in the night from the idea of being the wife of a duke. Harland listened to all of it with a quiet, contemplative look on his face. She did not know what that meant.

“I’ve terrified you now, haven’t I?”

He chuckled in the darkness. “No,” he replied. “I was just surprised, is all. Come here.”

Harland pulled her close and she laid her head on his chest. With his arms around her, she did not feel like her past. She did not feel like much of anything.

Kissing a man who wasn’t her betrothed was supposed to imply that she was tainted in some way, as though she had been spoiled for her future husband. Perhaps that might have been true, but as she drifted off to sleep, the only thing she could think was that she felt free. She felt in charge. She felt as though she were finally coming face to face with the wonder of her destiny.

CHAPTER EIGHT

In the harsh light of morning, Madeline expected to feel mortified, but instead she felt rather pleasant. Her lips were chapped, but it was merely a delightful reminder of his kisses the night before. She half expected Harland to be gone, leaving Madeline behind as the product of some terrible rake. As she opened her eyes and realized that she was alone in her bed, it seemed as though her expectations were coming true.

It was a strange feeling, to be sure, mostly because if he did love her and leave her, she probably would just go on living. She had expected, in a way, to be spoiled, but she did not feel that way at all. She simply felt like a woman who had lived through an experience, an enjoyable one. She was a woman who had embraced an attraction to a beautiful man and now was free to go on with her life.

Of course, despite looking on the bright side, she still rolled on her side, closing her eyes and breathing in his scent from the pillow. He smelled like the ocean. The only regret she had in this moment was the fact that she would

not have the chance to get to know him further; she felt as though she would have liked that, all things considered.

“Did I wake you?” a soft voice asked from across the room, and it dragged her out of her self-empowering reverie. Harland sat in a chair across the room, watching her with eyes that she could not read at the moment. Was he sad? Happy? She remembered her father making jokes about the mysterious emotions of women, but men simply did not know that they too carried mysteries.

“I thought you’d be long gone by now,” she told him, feeling vaguely silly for saying something such as that. His lips ticked up in a smile as he stood and made his way to her side, tilting her head up and kissing her again.

“I do not think I want to be going anywhere.”

She blushed, pulling the blanket up to cover herself, although he had already seen her in her nightgown. He smiled at her and stroked her cheeks, and Madeline felt those burning, icy butterflies begin to move in her stomach once again.

“You are very kind,” she said, once again cursing herself for her choice of words.

He grinned. “There’s no kindness about it. I just want to be seeing more of you, every day, for the foreseeable future.”

Madeline blushed brightly but turned to meet his gaze. As much as she believed that she was some liberated woman who could take a lover and then leave him without caring, she was happy to hear that this one was going to stay.

Of course, since daylight had broken, Madeline wasn’t sure she would be able to get him past Caoimhe or whether that would even be necessary. She did not want her new roommate to believe she was a woman of loose morals (although, Madeline supposed, she technically was now), so when it was time for Harland to leave, she peeked outside and saw nothing.

“Come on,” she whispered, reaching for his hand. He took it, and she led him out of her bedroom and into the sitting room that she shared with Caoimhe. The rooms were silent—so silent that she could hear the beating of her own nervous heart, and she practically pulled Harland through the rooms and out the door.

As quietly as they could, they descended the stairs and arrived once more in front of the tavern, where she had first seen him waiting for her. In broad daylight, she pulled him close and kissed him as though he were going out to sea again. He wrapped his arms around her and held her close, kissing her deeply. When they parted, he laid a final kiss on her forehead.

“I am going to see you again!” he swore.

“You know where to find me,” she replied.

“Good.” He gave her one last kiss, a quick one this time, and turned to stroll down the docks, whistling a jaunty tune and looking as though the entire world had been laid at his feet. Madeline watched him as he went, feeling like every love song she had ever listened to was real to her now; they were all singing for her. Her heart pounded in a lovely rhythm, and she wished that she could write and tell Victoria that she finally understood her younger sister’s preoccupation with love. Love was splendid, love was magical! Oh, if only Victoria could have the luxury of finding it for herself! It did not need to be with some high-ranking member of the gentry. Love wasn’t supposed to trap a

womaninto a life of dully planning parties and wearing beautiful dresses all the time. Love could be *anything* .

It broke her heart a little to realize that she had to run away from her home and everything she had known to truly understand that—that her family's love came with so much obligation that she never would have figured this out on her own. She allowed herself the small relief of knowing that, no matter what she was doing now, she was on the path to finding out who she was. She never knew that she could possibly stumble into a life like this. It cheered her.

Once he had disappeared from her line of vision, she turned to walk back up the stairs. It was early enough that she could probably sleep a little longer, and the idea of stretching out in the bed that was hers, earned after a long day's work, made it feel better than any feather mattress she had ever laid in.

Entering the rooms, she was a little surprised to see Caoimhe standing in the doorway of her own room. The look on her face showed she was a little less than impressed with Madeline's actions, and for a moment she felt the same kind of embarrassment she had felt when her mother used to

catch her doing something wrong. However, that quickly vanished under the weight of her own stubborn conviction.

Madeline held her head high, knowing exactly what she looked like. Clad in a nightgown, her hair all disheveled, she looked freshly kissed, and Caoimhe was not so innocent in this world to believe anything else. Caoimhe crossed her arms over her chest, her dark eyes burning like coals in the middle of her pale face. There was horror there, Madeline noticed, but as far as she could tell there wasn't any disappointment. She did not know if she could handle the disappointment of her new friend.

"I should have known," Caoimhe said. "A young woman, a young innocent, comes to this place and immediately takes up with the first rake she sees."

"That is not what happened," Madeline said calmly. In fact, she was completely surprised by her own calmness. "I made my own choice, I respect my own choice. It is okay, Caoimhe, I took a lover, I wasn't taken."

Caoimhe played nervously with the end of her braid as Madeline went over to the tiny wood stove to put the kettle on for tea. The two women sat in uneasy silence as they

waited for the water to boil, but once cups of tea were in their hands, Caoimhe took a deep breath.

“When I first arrived here, there was a man. His name was Freddie, or at least that was the name he gave me.”

Caoimhe’s cheeks reddened as she remembered this man, and Madeline leaned closer to listen to her tale of inevitable woe.

Caoimhe had been 17 when she came over to England, thinking it would be a land of opportunity. In her small town in Ireland, Caoimhe was destined to become a milkmaid or perhaps a farmer’s wife, but she would not have seen anything of the world.

“So I left,” she explained. “And I ended up in London working in a shop. And that was where I met Freddie.”

Freddie had been in the British Merchant Navy, and the moment he laid eyes on Caoimhe, who had been walking to the market one day, he jumped off of a boat that was preparing to shove off, ran to her side, and asked for her name.

From there it seemed like a dream. Freddie had big plans: he was going to earn a good wage from the merchant navy

and then he would come back to marry her.

“I am not going to pretend that I am not a simple woman,” Caoimhe said to Madeline, “and that you do not come from somewhere else, somewhere you do not want to talk about, but the rules are different and also the same. We may not have gone a courting too much, we may not have vast declarations, but a plan such as that was almost as formal…”

Due to his position, Freddie was often gone for long stretches at a time, and Caoimhe was faithful to him every time he left.

“Freddie loved making promises,” she said. “He loved to be in love and to love in return, so I honestly should not have been surprised to hear that he was in love with a girl in every single port he docked. By the time I found out, well, it was too late…”

Her cheeks turned red and she looked away from Madeline out of fear that her emotions would become too obvious. Madeline did not need to guess what kind of shame had been brought upon her. Madeline knew it would be rude to ask.

“I am not warning you about this because I think that Harland is a bad man. I think that men like him, those with the sea in their blood, they are different from other men. I just do not want you to feel the same heartache that I did.”

There was a moment then when it seemed as though Caoimhe was waiting for Madeline to finally, truly open up about her past, and yet Madeline stayed silent. It was not that she wanted to withhold this information from one of her only friends, especially now that Harland knew everything, but as she opened her mouth to speak, she simply could not bring herself to tell the tale. Admitting it to Harland had been like letting it go, and she did not want to bring it back up again.

So she said the only thing she could say:

“I’ll be careful.”

It wasn’t as though Caoimhe was disappointed; far from it, she seemed to take comfort in Madeline’s conviction even though they both knew that words were only words and the most important thing she could do was avoid being ruined by the attentions of a man. Neither of them knew for sure,

but for now Madeline was more than willing to take the chance.

“Just do not tell Liam,” Caoimhe said, forcing lightheartedness back into her voice. “I believe he’s taken a shine to you.”

CHAPTER NINE

To call their affair passionate was an understatement. Sometimes it seemed as though the two of them had been made to love each other, and they tried to do so at every given opportunity. Their eyes would meet the instant he walked into the tavern, as if they could feel each other. In that instant, a spark would light and quickly grow into a raging inferno deep within them. They were so consumed that it took every ounce of their restraint not to give into the fire right then and there. The flames would continue to rage throughout the night until the fire was too much, and at last they could let it engulf them.

Over the next month, Madeline felt as if she were walking on air. She felt magical in a way, carrying a delightful secret. Whenever he walked into the tavern, she could feel his eyes boring into the back of her neck, making her feel so alive.

Harland was fun; he was exciting. He loved to walk with her for hours and talk about nothing in particular. He liked to pull her out into the rain, when the wind whipped the waves up into a frenzy. Madeline loved to watch the sea like this,

the waves crashing against the pier in giant sprays of white and gray. Caoimhe and Carson often worried that she would get hurt out there one day, but when she was with Harland, she felt completely safe.

After a month and a half of working at The Admiral's Arms, she was finally beginning to feel as though she belonged. She joked with the regulars, she knew where everything was, and she was close with Caoimhe, of course, but also with Carson. They were becoming a sort of family for each other, although she was constantly wondering if Carson would ever get around to telling Caoimhe what he felt. It was sweet to watch, in any case, although she wasn't sure if Caoimhe knew or even if she felt the same way.

The only problem was Liam, the gangly and shy cook who barely spoke to her on good days and was now dodging her completely. It was confusing; she had never been anything less than completely kind to him, and her desire to become good friends with anyone had made her hover around him like a bumblebee around a flower. For the first few weeks he seemed to accept her with a growing sort of grace, almost smiling whenever she would ask him questions.

However, after Harland came in one day and gave her a kiss right in front of him, Liam had closed himself off to her.

For some reason, it drove Madeline mad. She spent more time than she should have wheedling him to get back into his good graces.

“Liam is a quiet boy,” Carson had said when Madeline went to him for advice. “He did not have a life that one would call happy, and we’ve been trying to give him the space to accept the idea that his life still has the chance for happiness.”

“Do you know what happened to him?” Madeline asked. Carson shook his head.

“These parts, it could be any number of things. Maybe his mother was one of those… girls, the ones on the docks. Either way, he was left to fend for himself for a long time.
It is not…”

Something you would understand, was the end of that sentence, Madeline knew. Although she had been working for The Admiral’s Arms long enough to become a bit of a fixture there, she still carried the taint of aristocracy, no

matter how much she tried to
deny it.

“I wonder if they’ll ever see me as one of them,” she complained to Harland one night as they lie together on her bed, their hearts still racing from the love they had made. “I am not some lady who wants to be dressed in fine satins and furs all the time. I am sure they can see that, right?”

“They will,” Harland said. “It just takes time.”

She did eventually hear a little bit about Harland’s life, but in broad brushstrokes. His father had been dead for two years, and after that he joined up with the nearest boat that would take him. His mother had always been sickly. He had a younger brother. Madeline could picture the cozy little cottage they must have lived in. She liked to picture little Harland, his light hair sticking out every which way, his glasses too large for his face, as he played with a boat and dreamed of something bigger.

The next morning Madeline was surprised to see Liam sitting at the bar when she walked in to begin preparations for that night. His gangly frame seated so high on the stool

made her think of a marionette puppet with its strings cut, but the look on his face was anything but jolly.

“Good afternoon, Liam! You are here quite early.”

Liam’s glum face looked up at her, his eyes searching her face for something before he gave a great sigh.

“I got a letter, but I’ve been hiding it from you,” he said sadly. Madeline’s heart dropped in her chest, but she forced her expression to remain neutral, even cheerful, lest he notice her momentary panic.

“Why? Whoever could it be from?”

Liam held up the letter and Madeline could see a stamped wax seal from where she stood. She backed away instinctively. How had she been found? It had been nearly two months since she had left the manor. How could they have found her so easily, even now? This panic lasted for only a moment or two before she realized that the wax used to make the seal was not her father’s usual green. Instead this was a bright red with an “S” stamped into it. She did not recognize the symbol as belonging to any lords she could think of, and it was too simple to be a lord’s seal.

Could this be Winston sending her a letter of warning in a disguise?

“I am sorry,” Liam whispered. “I know I am not allowed to take someone’s mail.”

“It is completely alright, Liam,” Madeline replied, keeping her tone as calm and soothing as she could manage. “I would just like to see what you have there. I promise I will not tell a soul.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Liam handed the letter over to Madeline, and without thinking she immediately opened it. Unfolding it, she saw a handwriting she did not recognize, found that it was not addressed to her, and against her better judgment, she began to read.

Harland,

I do hope that this finds you well. After all these years I never believed that I would actually be able to find you. How long has it been? I know that you still write to Mother, and I know that she greatly appreciates it. Now I write to you with a request

that I know she is too proud to make, and perhaps you are too proud to accept.

I need you to come home, Harland. I know that many will think that I am a fool for writing this. How often does a man build an empire with his bare hands only to abandon it? How often is a man who has been left to tend to your estate so willing to give up the fortune and the prestige that I have managed to attain running the empire in your stead? And yet here I am asking you to return, and I don't know if you have a choice in the matter. As much as I would like to play the leader, this was always the position you earned, and I think it's time for you to put aside your childish sailing and come back to take up the mantle of Colonel Sanders.

Mother would never tell you this, not in her letters anyway, but she's incredibly sick. I don't know how much longer she has, and I very dearly hope that you read my words and take them seriously. She wants to see you one last time, and I

believe it would be best if she saw you come home to take back what you spent so long building. The hills of Kentucky miss you, as do all of us.

I hope this finds you well and in good faith.

Your brother,

David

Madeline could feel Liam's eyes on her face as she read the letter. Harland. *Her* Harland was the owner of an empire? A member of the American gentry? The very type of person that Madeline had wanted to run away from? Her Harland?

The letter slipped through her fingers, and she stepped away from it, as if trying to distance herself from the truth. Good lord, what had she done? She put on her mask of cheerfulness and looked up at Liam again.

"Thank you. Do not worry one bit, you will not be in any kind of trouble, I promise. But I must go and take a walk for a moment. Would you mind getting the tavern ready to open today?"

Liam had not even finished nodding by the time Madeline escaped from the horror of what she had just learned.

For the past month, Persephone had been held in the stables on the edge of town, where Madeline paid for her care and took her for long rides on the mornings she did not have anywhere to be. The mare looked happy to see her, which made Madeline glad, and she saddled her up and mounted her, even if she wasn't particularly dressed for it.

"Hello, Persephone. I know you know where we are going," Madeline whispered to the horse, easing her down the very road they had traveled to arrive at Mistle-Thrush-by-the-Sea. Persephone loved to run, and Madeline loved the feeling of the wind in her hair, and she truly didn't know where she was going until she realized she was there.

The cliffs.

Dismounting and leaving Persephone to graze, Madeline walked up to the very same cliffs she had looked out over before arriving to town, before she felt as though her entire life had changed. She closed her eyes and breathed in the sea air.

Harland was the very thing she had been running from, wasn’t he? She had told him everything. Why hadn’t he told her? He had kept such a huge secret from her, and what’s more, he had remained in touch with his family, enough that they could summon him home. Is that what he was going to do? Had he been planning that all along? Was she just a lark to him?

Or worse, was he grooming her to be a wife? Did he expect to bring her back to whatever manor he came from to live the life of the happily married wife and give up everything she had tried to build for herself?

She stood at the edge of the cliff and wondered about this. Distantly she heard someone call her name, and she knew it was him. Maybe he had discovered that she had read the letter; it was certainly possible. She needed to figure out what to do. She needed to make
a choice.

“Madeline!” Harland’s voice had an edge of nervousness to it, implying that he knew that she had discovered his secret.

Taking a deep breath, Madeline turned to face her lover—her lover who had lied.

The wind had whipped Harland's fair hair around his face, blowing against his beautifully sculpted cheekbones and glasses. Seeing him standing there, she momentarily lost her will to anger as her stomach dropped, dizzy with the love that she felt for him.

"Madeline," he said again to her softly.

"Colonel," she replied, her voice touched with ice as the betrayal hit her all over again. The look on his face said it all, and his expectant gaze dropped into one close to panic before he righted himself.

"I was going to tell you."

"When?" Madeline placed her hands on her hips, her heart racing with fear as she confronted him. When was the last time she had faced anything full-on? She couldn't remember, but it was exhilarating. "After it was too late?'

"Isn't it already?" His voice was tender as he moved closer beside her, reaching up to touch her shoulder gently. She closed her eyes for a bit, savoring the nearness of him, before taking a step back in an effort to put distance

between them. “I love you, Madeline, and I know that you love me too. Isn’t that all that matters?”

Yes, her mind thought wildly, but she shook her head against her own errant and impassioned thoughts and focused on the reality of the situation. Reading the lines of her face, Harland’s face began to take on the tragic look of a heartbroken man. It hurt Madeline to see it.

“Yes, I’m a Colonel. *Yes*, I’m fabulously rich. I am a magnate of the restaurant industry, my dear, the king of an empire that I built with my bare hands. I took a sabbatical from my duties in order to see the world, see what else could possibly be out there, and on the course of my journey I found what I was looking for.”

Her heart fluttered wildly in the space of his pauses. In spite of everything, she found herself hanging on his every word.

“I found you, Madeline. I wanted to tell you, but when you told me why you ran away, I couldn’t bring myself to tell you. How could I, knowing that it might drive you away?”

“Lying wouldn’t fix that!” she protested. “Lying only makes things worse!”

“Now you know,” he replied solemnly. “You know everything, and all I can do is hope that you still love me.”

Of course she still loved him. How could she not? That did not necessarily mean that they were meant to be together. Could she truly be another high-society wife? Could she give up Caoimhe, Liam, Carson, and her new life to sit in a house and wear pretty clothes and say pretty things for the rest of her life? The thought of it daunted her.

“It doesn’t have to be all or nothing,” Harland said as though he had been reading her mind. “Loving me won’t force you into a life you don’t want to live.”

“You’d give everything up for me?” she asked incredulously. Harland’s face lit up.

“Of course!” he threw out his hands as though he were throwing everything away, taking in the sunset as it began to set over the ocean. The salty sea spray whipped at their hair, and Madeline hugged herself, watching the spectacle. “I would burn everything to the ground if it meant that you would still love me as much as you did when you thought I was a

simple sailor.”

“I never thought you were *simple*,” she replied with a touch of mischief. “But I couldn’t ask that of you. Not after you built everything.”

“You’re not asking that of me. I’m offering it willingly.”

And with that he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close against the sunset. It felt electric when their lips met, and for a moment everything left Madeline’s mind, leaving only the clear and simple beauty of how much she loved him.

Then she pushed him away.

“I can’t,” she said, tears welling up in her eyes. “I can’t do it.”

She turned away before her second thoughts could stop her own footfalls, covering her mouth with her hands as if she could press the kiss into her lips forever. Harland stood there, dumbfounded, as she began to walk down the path. Persephone stood not too far away, grazing peacefully, completely unaware that the world was ending. Madeline was several steps away from her, her knees trembling with the fragile gravity of her decision.

If he calls my name, she thought, *I'll turn around and be his forever*.

The waves crashed in the distance, tugging at Madeline's heartstrings like the tide. Tears streamed down her face. Could she simply leave? Would he let her go?

A particularly large wave crashed against the rocks below, but softly, oh so very softly, Madeline heard him utter a name. Picturing the scenario in her mind, she thought she would whirl around like a frenzied dancer, throwing herself into the safety of his arms once more. Instead she simply turned, her face a mask of tears and serenity, and looked upon his face. Moments stretched between them like years, like decades, until with a final cry she began to run into his waiting arms.

EPILOGUE:

THREE MONTHS LATER

My Dearest Madeline,

I am ever so heartened to hear from you, as it seems like ages since we were reunited! I still cannot tell you just how relieved we all were when we heard that you are well, and ever more surprised to learn that you're now betrothed to a colonel! How terribly romantic for you to have fallen in love by the seaside. I always knew it would happen!

Speaking of love, I was unable to tell you the fantastic news that occurred after the last time you visited. It seems I have fallen in love myself, with none other than Reginald! How truly terrific that we are both to marry those we love, and I am thankful every day that you fled that night. If it weren't for such bold action, would we both be facing down our every happiness now?

Please write to me from America. I want to hear about everything that ladies do there, especially the fashion!

Your ever faithful and loving sister, Victoria

Madeline laughed as she folded the letter in her hand and placed it on the table of her vanity. She still wasn't used to spending so much time on a boat, but being seated seemed to make her feel better. The past three months had been a whirlwind of wedding announcements and marriage plans, and it seemed as though Victoria was about to step into her own storm. Madeline was pleased that her sister had found love, and she was sure that their parents would be pleased with their youngest daughter becoming a duchess.

It had been only three days since they said goodbye to Caoimhe and Carson from the deck of the ship. Madeline had been delighted to see Carson take Caoimhe's hand as they waved, knowing full well that it was only a matter of time for the two of them. Everything seemed to be working out wonderfully, except that her fiancé was late coming to bed.

Madeline found him standing on the deck of the ship, looking out over the ocean in the direction of England, and Madeline took the moment to watch him, taking in the

handsomeness of his face. After a minute or two, she could hear him laugh.

“I know you’re there, Future Mrs. Sanders,” he said, turning to look at her. “Come and watch the sunset with me.”

She walked to his side, feeling his arm slip around her waist and hold her close. As the wind blew through their hair, they stood by each other’s side and sailed off into their own private happily ever after.